

## TEXTILES FROM MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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**ABSTRACT:** The Central American Collection at the Náprstek Museum contains a collection of 396 textiles and textile ensembles from Mexico and Central America. This article presents the first comprehensive overview of the collection, which has not previously been published. The core of the holdings consists of textiles produced by various indigenous groups of Mexico and Guatemala, encompassing both complete men's and women's attires and items created with traditional techniques intended primarily for the tourist market. Particular attention is paid to the circumstances of acquisition and the role of individual collectors, with emphasis on the fact that most of the collection was assembled during the communist era in Czechoslovakia (1948–1989), when travel to the Americas was strictly limited. The study also provides an overall assessment of the collection with regard to its cultural and geographical origins and offers a concise evaluation of the textiles' chronology, materials, and production techniques.

**KEYWORDS:** textile – traditional clothing – provenance research – Mexico – Guatemala – Honduras – Panama – Costa Rica

### Introduction

The Náprstek Museum is the biggest museum of non-European cultures in the Czech Republic. As such, it is also the institution that houses the largest collections of material culture of the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and which, since 1858, has been professionally processing and expanding collections of textile art from this region.<sup>2</sup> Central American Collection of the Náprstek Museum<sup>3</sup> contains more than 390 textiles and textile ensembles. Thanks to the fact that fiber arts in this area are still alive today, this collection continues to expand with new acquisitions and donations. The entire collection consists of textiles produced between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and unlike the South American collection, it contains no archaeological textile finds.

In the first part of this article, the geographical and ethnographic origins of the textiles and place textile production in this region within its cultural context and chronological framework will be briefly addressed. The materials used and the weaving and dyeing techniques applied will also be summarised. The second part of the article, which forms its core, focuses on the acquisition history of the studied corpus, with an emphasis on the specific circumstances of the communist period, when it was extremely difficult for Czech travellers to reach Mexico

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<sup>2</sup> Onderka et al. 2024, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> 'Central American Collection' is the official, historically established name of a sub-collection at the Náprstek Museum. It is known that it is a somewhat inaccurate from a cultural and geographical point of view, as it includes collections from Mexico, the Caribbean, and all of Central America, including Panama, which culturally belongs to the Isthmus-Colombian area.

and Central America. How these circumstances have influenced the present composition of the collection will also be assessed.

In this overview study, we present the state of the collection as of 2025. The study is linked to a digital database of textiles published by the National Museum in Prague.<sup>4</sup> This database will be continually updated and supplemented with additional textiles that will be added to the collections in the coming years. In 2025, the Central American Collection of the Náprstek Museum contains 396 textiles and textile ensembles. Most of them come from Mexico – 296 textiles, a smaller part from Guatemala – 86 textiles, the smallest collection from Panama – 12 textiles, one textile items from Honduras, and one from Costa Rica.

In this study, we will focus on textile products made of cotton, wool, synthetic textile fibres, and leather. For leather products, we limited the selection of items to clothing or clothing accessories, excluding, for example, horse harnesses. The only exception is accessories for ceremonial clothing made from materials other than those specified, which form an integral part of the outfit (masks, bows, and dance shoes). For the sake of completeness, it is also mentioned that this study does not cover products made from plant fibres besides cotton, such as palm leaves, yucca, or agave fibres.

This collection has never been studied, and many of the artefacts have no accompanying documentation that would indicate their origin, circumstances of acquisition, technique used, age, and other important parameters. As part of the material and archival research that preceded the database, 159 textiles and textile collections were provided with this basic documentation. For another 237 artefacts, the existing data based on the findings from the study was then revised.

This textile ensemble forms the core of the Náprstek Museum's Central American Collection. Despite the limited amount of information that has been available about this ensemble to date, it has often been exhibited in the past, mainly due to its high aesthetic value and a breadth that represents the artistic craftsmanship of various groups of Indigenous People in Mexico and Guatemala. Central American textiles were part of the permanent exhibition *Amerika – Vznik, vývoj osídlení, kultura a způsob života* (America – Origin, Development of Settlement, Culture, and Way of Life, 1965, author Václav Šolc, revised and supplemented in 1983 by Olga Kanderová and Kateřina Klápštová), as well as a number of exhibitions in various cities in the Czech Republic, mostly under the curatorial leadership of Kateřina Klápštová.<sup>5</sup>

## Evaluation of research sources

Given the size of the collection, the aim of this initial phase of research was to map the collection from a geographical and cultural perspective. The intention was to conduct provenance research, identify the groups of Indigenous Peoples whose members made the individual garments, and determine their places of origin – geographical areas or specific communities.

Both handicraft textile items intended for tourists and ethnic garments of the Indigenous Peoples are continually renewed. Individual styles are gradually changing, influenced by fashion trends.<sup>6</sup> Most of collection date from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to the 1980s. To determine the origin of individual artefacts, we therefore had to use mainly older sources – books

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<sup>4</sup> Melicharová 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Larger exhibition projects included *Móda mimoevropských národů* (Fashion of Non-European Nations, 1983, curator Libuše Boháčková) and *Cesty k Bohům. Obřady ze současného Mexika a Peru* (Paths to the Gods. Ceremonies from Contemporary Mexico and Peru, 2002, curator Kateřina Klápštová, together with Olga Vilímková).

<sup>6</sup> Martínez and Celigueta 2024, p. 124.

or other illustrated publications, as well as digitised collections from other ethnographic museums around the world. Two study trips to Mexico (2013) and Guatemala (2024), during which the author of this study stayed directly in indigenous communities engaged in handmade textile production, were also very helpful in gaining a general understanding of traditional textile production in Mexico and Guatemala.<sup>7</sup>

To determine the origin and approximate date of the Mexican part of the collection, a publication *Lo Efímero y Eterno del Arte Popular Mexicano*<sup>8</sup> from 1974 was used. This two-volume book features a large number of colour photographs of traditional clothing and celebrations of the Indigenous Peoples of Mexico. The publications *The Crafts of Mexico* from 2004<sup>9</sup> and *The Popular Arts of Mexico* from 1974<sup>10</sup> were also used. These are not specialist ethnographic or anthropological books, but rather publications for art collectors. Nevertheless, they served well for the basic mapping of the collection and determining the origin of the artefacts. To a lesser extent, Similarly focused books *Arts and Crafts of Mexico*<sup>11</sup> from 1990, from the 1997 catalogue of the Ruth D. Lechuga Museum of Mexican Folk Art<sup>12</sup> and from the publication *Popular Arts of Mexico Popular Arts of Mexico 1850–1950*<sup>13</sup> were also drawn upon. The latter book only discusses wool and cotton carpets and tapestries from Mexican textile production. A relatively large number – around sixty artefacts in the examined collection – come from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, so the publication *The Unbroken Thread*<sup>14</sup> from 1997, dedicated to the textile art of the Indigenous People of Oaxaca.

Almost half of the collection from Guatemala consists of items that are more than 100 years old, namely the collection of Emilie Preisová. Coincidentally, The Hearst Museum of Anthropology in University of California, Berkeley has a very similar collection from the same period by Swedish-born American zoologist Gustav Eisen. The collection was published in 1993 in a book entitled *Maya Textiles of Guatemala: the Gustavus A. Eisen Collection, 1902*.<sup>15</sup> This publication was an important source for identifying the Guatemalan part of the collection in the Náprstek Museum. Guatemalan textiles are also discussed from a similar perspective in another work drawn on – *Elmenhorst & Co.: 150 Jahre Hamburger Sammlungen zu den Maya aus Guatemala*.<sup>16</sup> This book, written in Spanish and German, focuses on collections of Guatemalan arts and crafts from the last 150 years at the Museum am Rothenbaum in Hamburg, Germany. Our main source for determining the origin of *huipil* from Guatemala was the photographic map *Huipiles Mayas de Guatemala*.<sup>17</sup> This overview map was published by Museo Ixchel in Guatemala City and was purchased during the author's stay in the country. The 2015 publication *Traditional Weavers of Guatemala* was very useful in helping understand the techniques and regional specifics of textile production in Guatemala.<sup>18</sup> Information on the textile art of the Guna from

<sup>7</sup> In 2013, the author visited the Mexican states of Michoacán, Oaxaca, and Chiapas, and in 2024, and focused mainly on the Guatemalan Highlands, various communities around Lake Atitlán, and the city of Chichicastenango.

<sup>8</sup> Méndez and Yampolsky 1974.

<sup>9</sup> De Orellana et al. 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Toneyama and Espejel 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Sayer and Lavender 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Ruy Sánchez Lacy 1997.

<sup>13</sup> McMenamin and Loper 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Klein 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Blum Schevill 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Köpke and Schmelz 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Knoke de Arathoon and Miralbés de Polanco 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Chandler et al. 2015.

Panama was drawn primarily from the book *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning Among the Kuna of Panama* (1997).<sup>19</sup>

For understanding the cultural context of the collection in a general way, the author primarily relied on publications *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica and Andes* (1999)<sup>20</sup> and *Amerindian Socio-cosmologies between the Andes, Amazonia and Mesoamerica* (2020),<sup>21</sup> which of the studied regions deals only Panama and Gunas.

For the research concerning the acquisition history, the author used both archival materials from the Náprstek Museum (Accession books, Archive of the Náprstek Museum Originators, Inventory cards), some of which have already been processed in the book *Dějiny Náprstkova muzea II* (History of the Náprstek Museum II, 2024) and personal interviews with the collectors themselves or with witnesses (Kateřina Klápšťová, Josef and Olga Kandert, Mnislav Zelený, Petr Poledník, Vlastimil Vodák, and Olga Vilímková), as well as sources written by them or about them – in particular, Zelený's books *Veselé tropy Amazonie* (The Joyful Tropics of the Amazon, 2016),<sup>22</sup> Šolc's book *Indiánským Mexikem* (Indigenous Mexico, 1983)<sup>23</sup> and the book by Bortlová-Vondráková, *Španělská vesnice* (Spanish Village, 2021),<sup>24</sup> which includes an interview with Kateřina Klápšťová.

## Origins of textiles

In this section, a brief overview is provided of the indigenous groups from which textile products are in the collection and the number of artefacts from each region [Tab. 1]. Culturally, the studied collection was divided into three areas: northern and central Mexico, the Mayan-speaking region (the southern states of Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras), Costa Rica and Isthmus-Colombian area (Panama). From Mexico outside the Mayan-speaking region, 155 textiles were identified – most often traditional garments or parts thereof, representing the work of a total of 14 groups of Indigenous People.<sup>25</sup> Further, 104 textiles were identified from the Mayan-speaking region – again, mostly typical garments or parts thereof, representing the typical work of 12 Mayan-speaking groups. The Central American Collection includes 13 textiles from Panama and Costa Rica, mostly products of the Panamanian Gunas.

It wasn't possible to determine with certainty which group of Indigenous People the remaining textiles from the Central American Collection – 125 items – belonged to. These textiles are strongly adapted to Western aesthetics,<sup>26</sup> products intended for tourists, or attires for ceremonial dances or celebrations that have a transcultural dimension. For 53 of these items, it was possible to trace at least a probable region of origin (Mexican state or Guatemalan department).

It is interesting to look at the researched collection from a gender perspective. Male attire has generally been preserved to a much lesser extent across Latin America. This is largely because men entered urban employment, where the wearing of traditional ethnic clothing was no

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<sup>19</sup> Salvador 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Blum Schevill et al. 1991.

<sup>21</sup> Halbmayer, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Zelený 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Šolc 1983.

<sup>24</sup> Bortlová-Vondráková 2021.

<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that for some textiles it wasn't possible to determine their origin with certainty, and therefore the group of Indigenous People is marked, or possibly the state and community, with a question mark in the database. It is assumed that in connection with further research, continual updates and the data will be supplemented in the database.

<sup>26</sup> Typical examples of such items are crocheted starched *doilies* and tablecloths Inv. Nos. 71833–71839.

longer socially encouraged. Both the creators of the clothing and its wearers, as well as those who preserved traditional dress, were and still are predominantly women. This distribution is also reflected in the Central American Collection. Of all 396 textiles, we expect that only about seventy are used exclusively or also by men. The exact number is difficult to determine because in some groups, shoulder bags (*costal* or *morral*) are not strictly gender-specific accessories. Typically, these are bags from the Huicholes (called *kutsiuri*) or Cora groups, which are commonly worn by both men and women.<sup>27</sup> Men's attire in the collections from the Huichol, Tzotzil, and Mixtec are complete. Below are tables showing an overview of groups of Indigenous People and the number of textiles according to three defined areas.

**Tab. 1.** Summary of the cultural and geographic origins of the of the textiles in the collection.

Mexico		
Indigenous Group	State	Number of textiles
Amuzgo	Guerrero <sup>28</sup>	10
Chinantec	Oaxaca	2
Huastec	San Luis Potosí <sup>29</sup>	5
Huave	Oaxaca	5
Huichol/Cora	Jalisco, Nayarit <sup>30</sup>	26
Mazahua	Estado de México <sup>31</sup>	2
Mixtec	Oaxaca, Guerrero <sup>32</sup>	7
Nahua	Puebla, Veracruz <sup>33</sup>	22
Otomí	Hidalgo, Puebla, Querétaro <sup>34</sup>	19
Popoloca	Puebla	1
Purépecha	Michoacán <sup>35</sup>	4
Totonac	Puebla <sup>36</sup>	17
Trique	Oaxaca	5
Zapotec	Oaxaca	30

<sup>27</sup> Inv. Nos. 58483, 71827, 71829, 71907, 72020–72022.

<sup>28</sup> It is certain that 4 artefacts are from Guerrero. The others may be from Guerrero or Oaxaca.

<sup>29</sup> It is certain that 5 artefacts are from San Luis Potosí. The rest may be from the entire La Huasteca region (states of San Luis Potosí, Veracruz).

<sup>30</sup> It is known for certain that 19 artefacts are from the state of Jalisco and one artefact is from Nayarit. The rest may be from the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Zacatecas, or Durango.

<sup>31</sup> It is for certain that 1 artefact comes from the Estado de México.

<sup>32</sup> It is certain that five artefacts are from Oaxaca, and one is from the state of Guerrero.

<sup>33</sup> It is certain that 13 artefacts are from Puebla, and we know that 2 are from Veracruz. The rest are probably from either the state of Puebla, Veracruz, or Hidalgo.

<sup>34</sup> It is certain that 14 artefacts are from Hidalgo, one artefact is from the state of Puebla, and one is from the state of Querétaro.

<sup>35</sup> It is certain that 3 artefacts are from the state of Michoacán.

<sup>36</sup> It is certain that 12 artefacts are from Puebla. The rest may be from either Puebla or Veracruz.

Maya region			
Indigenous Group	Country	State or department	Number of textiles
Ch'orti'	Honduras	Copán department	1
Chuj	Guatemala	Huehuetenango department	2
Ixil	Guatemala	Quiché department	1
Q'anjob'al	Guatemala	Huehuetenango department	1
Kaqchikel	Guatemala	Ciudad de Guatemala, Chimaltenango, Sacatepéquez and Sololá departments <sup>37</sup>	15
Mam	Guatemala	Huehuetenango department <sup>38</sup>	6
Q'eqchi'	Guatemala	Alta Vera Paz department	2
Tz'utujil,	Guatemala	Sololá department	4
K'iche', Guatemala/ Mexico	Mexico, Guatemala	Totonicapán, Quetzaltenango, Huehuetenango, Quiché departments (Guatemala), Chiapas state (Mexico) <sup>39</sup>	42
Tojol-ab'al	Mexico	Chiapas state	1
Tzotzil	Mexico	Chiapas state	15
Tzeltal	Mexico	Chiapas state	1
Yucatec	Mexico	Yucatán state	2
Mayan-speaking Indigenous People – unspecified	Mexico, Guatemala		10
Panama and Costa Rica			
Indigenous Group	Country	Province	Number of textiles
Guna	Panama	Comarca Guna Yala	11
unspecified	Panama		1
Chorotega	Costa Rica	Guanacaste	1

<sup>37</sup> One textile is from the department of Guatemala City, two are from Chimaltenango, six artefacts are from the department of Sacatepéquez, and four are from the department of Sololá.

<sup>38</sup> It is known that one artefact comes from the Guatemalan Highlands, but it is not known exactly which department it comes from.

<sup>39</sup> From the departments of Guatemala, there are: 6 textiles from Totonicapán, 26 artefacts from Quetzaltenango, 1 artefact from Huehuetenango, and 2 artefacts from Quiché. From the Mexican state of Chiapas, there are 4 artefacts and 5 textiles from an unspecified area in the Guatemalan Highlands.

## Ethnographic context

In the following section, only a very brief and necessarily limited overview of the cultural background of the collection is provided. It is problematic to generalize when dealing with such a large corpus of textiles originating from 30 different groups of Indigenous People, regions, and timeframes, especially as the collection also includes pieces strongly influenced by modern aesthetics and were most likely intended for the tourist market.

Pre-Columbian weavers in Mexico and Central America were primarily women. Spinning and weaving played a central role in shaping notions of femininity.<sup>40</sup> As attributes of the Mother Goddess<sup>41</sup> complex, these activities were symbolically linked to divine authority and metaphorically to fertility and reproduction. Cotton, which remains a major component of ethnic dress in Mexico and Central America today, was particularly significant: it functioned as a highly valued trade and tribute commodity tied to elite status.

In the present, both men and women participate in the production and, especially, the marketing of textiles.<sup>42</sup> Clothing, adornment, textiles, and the act of weaving itself continue to serve as powerful indicators of social organization, ritual life, economic networks, and adherence to *costumbre*, the traditional way of life recognised by Indigenous Peoples of Mexico and Guatemala. Ethnic attire is often a substantial financial investment and reflects the wealth of the wearer<sup>43</sup> – backstrap weaving is labour-intensive; materials are often costly and weavers rarely receive adequate compensation for the time invested. Ceremonial garments, which communicate both the social role of the wearer and the nature of the event, are more elaborate and finely crafted than everyday attire.

Cloth may be ‘read’ as a text, but it also functions as a meaningful object whose social significance is communicative, poetic, economic, and political.<sup>44</sup> Within many towns and regions, two or more textile systems – indigenous and non-indigenous – may coexist simultaneously. In many Indigenous communities, clothing traditions provide some of the most visible evidence of cultural autonomy, leading to the codification of town or region-specific styles.

Many ethnic attires preserved in the studied collection originate from the Mexican state of Oaxaca and the Guatemalan Highlands, regions where geographic isolation due to mountainous terrain contributed to the development of distinctive local styles. Ethnic groups in these areas maintain their own language, dress, civil-religious hierarchies, economic specialisations, oral traditions, and aesthetic systems. Even where communities are not physically isolated, strong

<sup>40</sup> Spinning and weaving together symbolised the stages of a woman’s life cycle: spinning was linked to young girls and elderly women, while weaving was the duty of married women, who were expected to provide clothing for their families, particularly for their husbands and children. Infertility was often described through the metaphor of someone who spun but never wove, as seen in the myth of the *cihuapipiltin*, the deified women who had died in childbirth. A modern tale from the state of Chiapas tells of witches in the mountains who spend their days endlessly spinning, reinforcing the idea that, ‘spinning without weaving is a futile and unproductive occupation.’ Blum Schevill 1991, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> In many cultures the symbolism of spinning and weaving was closely associated with pre-Columbian goddesses (such as Tlazolteotl, Xochiquetzal, Mayahuel in Aztec culture, and Ixchel in Maya cosmogony). McCafferty and McCafferty 1991, pp. 26.

<sup>42</sup> In the Guatemalan Highlands, when a woman is recognised as a skilled weaver, all her family members – even the young boys – are taught backstrap weaving. Blum Schevill 1991, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> This is especially evident amongst Mayan-speaking women of the Guatemalan Highlands and Zapotec women of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

<sup>44</sup> It may express these characteristics: linguistic region and subregion, community, subcommunity status information, gender, marital status, age group, socioeconomic position, membership in community groups, ceremonial roles, family affiliation, personal aesthetics, technical skills, progressiveness, self-expressiveness. Pancake 1991, p. 54.

cultural boundaries separate them. These aesthetic systems are reproduced across generations with incremental innovations reflecting the weaver's personal choices.<sup>45</sup>

Alongside the preservation and creative reproduction of these distinctive features in ethnic clothing within individual communities, another process unfolds in parallel. Textile traditions form part of broader intercultural systems of exchange. Especially over the last sixty years, handicraft textiles from Mexico and Central America have become increasingly desirable commodities worldwide. Artisans have responded to outside influence by producing both innovative and traditional forms. At the same time, consumers are purchasing items rooted in tradition alongside contemporary designs. These textile products, primarily intended for tourists (a phenomenon especially characteristic of Mexico, which has long promoted the creation of this type of folk art), also constitute a noteworthy segment of the studied collection. In turn, the tastes and preferences of Western tourists feed back into the creative process, inspiring Indigenous weavers and even influencing the production of traditional ethnic dress within their communities.

## Materials and techniques

Materials and techniques are only briefly mentioned in this study, mainly due to the large size of the sample under investigation. Many of the individual artefacts would undoubtedly deserve a separate study. In terms of materials, most of the textiles are made of cotton or contain cotton as a significant component – this is the case for 311 artefacts. Some of these textiles are hand-made using various types of looms, of which two basic types are distinguished: backstrap weaving (*telar de cintura*) and the foot loom (*telar de pedal / telar de pie*).<sup>46</sup> It is proposed that at least part of the clothing was hand-woven on a loom in at least 220 artefact. Most of the remaining textiles are machine-sewn from factory-made cotton canvas or some type of synthetic or fabric, with a small group of them being crocheted or knitted. Mexican blouses in particular combine factory-made canvas sewn on a machine with hand embroidery.

The pedal loom, like sheep's wool, did not arrive in Central America until the Spanish colonial period. In contrast, backstrap weaving is a pre-Columbian technique used long before the arrival of Europeans to process domestic plant fibres and cotton.<sup>47</sup> A foot loom makes it easier to process wool, which is heavier than cotton. Men also engage in this type of weaving<sup>48</sup> and is generally less widespread than backstrap weaving.<sup>49</sup> The reason for this is not only the pre-Columbian tradition of backstrap weaving. In the case of foot loom weaving, there is also the need for an initial investment in the loom itself, whereas producing a portable backstrap loom is far less costly.

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<sup>45</sup> While straying from these aesthetic conventions is not explicitly prohibited, it often exposes the weaver to ridicule or gossip. When asked why they do not simply create designs of their own choosing, most weavers respond that 'it is tradition' to follow particular styles and that 'people would laugh' if community customs were ignored. See Pancake 1991, p. 51.

<sup>46</sup> This kind of a loom then has various variants depending on the type and size of the woven fabric. See Chandler et al. 2015, pp. 48, 54, 68.

<sup>47</sup> Chandler et al. 2015, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> See Chandler et al. 2015, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> In Guatemala, a distinction is even made between *huipil* woven by the hand of a woman – that is, *huipil* made using the backstrap weaving technique – and *huipil* woven by the hand of a man – that is woven on a foot loom. The latter is considered less valuable in local indigenous communities. See Chandler et al. 2015, p. 12.

The backstrap weaving technique is still used today in Mexico and Guatemala to produce traditional women's outer garments known as *huipil*, as well as wrap skirts (called *enredo* or *pozahuanco* in Mexico and *corte* in Guatemala) and *rebozo* shawls.<sup>50</sup> Both the *huipil* and the *enredo* (*pozahuanco*, *corte*) are clothing items of pre-Columbian origin. In some cases, however, only decorative parts of the garments are made on the backstrap loom and the rest is made from factory-produced canvas.<sup>51</sup> In addition to weaving wool, foot looms are primarily used for cotton products that require a high density of woven fabric (e.g., decorative hair ribbons *cinta* worn by women in Guatemala,<sup>52</sup> or *faja* belts).

Another part of the cotton textiles in the Central American Collection is sewn by hand or machine from pre-purchased machine-made cotton cloth. In some cases, hand and machine production are combined in the sewing process. These are mainly women's blouses of the Nahuas group, which did not arrive in Mexico as a type of clothing until the colonial period and are sewn from several pieces.<sup>53</sup> Blouses are typically machine-sewn but embroidered by hand. The author proposes that at least eighty textiles from the Central American Collection are assembled and decorated at least partially or entirely on a sewing machine.

A smaller portion of the textiles is made from sheep's wool – 47 artefacts are made entirely from wool. For most of them the aforementioned technique of weaving on foot loom was identified. These are mainly carpets, tapestries, *ponchos*, and *sarapes* from Mexico.<sup>54</sup> Another 45 textiles combine wool with other fibres – cotton, various synthetic fibres, sisal. A specific artefact is the densely woven rugs, tapestries, and *sarapes* from the northern Mexican city of Saltillo in the state of Coahuila, which combine cotton (warp fibres) and wool (weft fibres).<sup>55</sup>

The collection also includes garments made mainly from synthetic fibres, with factory prints and sewn on machine. These make up a smaller part of the collection – it is estimated about two dozen textiles or other attire components. There are also some interesting outfits amongst them – most often ceremonial dance attires.<sup>56</sup>

The most elaborate garments are hand-decorated textiles using various embroidery or brocade techniques. Brocade (*brocado*) is a pre-Columbian technique for decorating textiles, used mainly in backstrap weaving. Unlike embroidery, where ornaments are sewn onto the finished fabric, brocade weaving involves weaving the decoration as an additional weft into the base fabric during the weaving process itself. The weft is pulled by a shed through the warp threads. Due to the laborious nature of production and the fact that each piece of fabric is naturally unique, these artefacts are a rare part of the collection. The brocade technique is typically used in richly-decorated women's traditional clothing – *huipil*. *Huipil* commonly combine embroidery and brocade, sometimes using synthetic fibres (e.g., acrylic yarn, viscose, or silk) or scraps of fabrics other than cotton. It is estimated that brocade was used on at least a part of approximately 120 textiles.

Another type of decoration used is embroidery. It was identified that this technique was used on 131 artefacts. Typically, these are the aforementioned women's cotton blouses. A fre-

<sup>50</sup> The Náprstek Museum collection has *rebozos* from Mexico, but they are also worn in Guatemala and other countries in Central America.

<sup>51</sup> e.g., Inv. Nos. 71858, A8494.

<sup>52</sup> See Inv. Nos. 71764, 71787, 71789, 71909–71912.

<sup>53</sup> e.g., Inv. Nos. 62316, 62317, 62319, 62321–62325, 62182, 71635, 72039–72041, 71844, 71845, 71875.

<sup>54</sup> In the Mexican state of Oaxaca, the production of woollen textiles on foot looms is typical mainly of the Zapotec communities of Teotitlán del Valle and San Pablo Villa de Mitla, which are quite popular amongst tourists.

<sup>55</sup> Inv. Nos. A5097, A5165, 40402, 56676, 67877, 71849.

<sup>56</sup> e.g., Inv. Nos. 63641–63647, 64049 a–c, 71888 a–c, 71892 a–c, 71893.

quently used stitch is chain stitch,<sup>57</sup> or front flat stitch,<sup>58</sup> or cross-stitch.<sup>59</sup> Another group of textiles decorated with cross-stitch embroidery are the traditional garments of the Mexican Huichol<sup>60</sup> and Huastec. Huastec *quechquemitl* garments stand out – women's outer garments worn over the shoulders and, originally of also pre-Columbian origin, richly embroidered with cross-stitch and herringbone (cross) stitch.<sup>61</sup> Amongst decorative textiles, which became widespread in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the development of tourism, cotton tapestries – textile pictures called *tenango*<sup>62</sup> should be mentioned. These are decorative textiles embroidered with a front flat stitch, typical of the Tenango de Doria community, inhabited by the Otomí, in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico.

The dyeing techniques will only briefly be mentioned here. A detailed chemical analysis of the dyes used is the subject of a separate study. However, for most artefacts, the use of artificial dyes for dyeing cotton and wool and the use of chemically pre-dyed cotton yarn for embroidery and broaching may be proposed. Then there is a group of artefacts – mainly woollen products of Zapotec of Oaxaca – for which the author hypothesises a combination of chemical and natural dyes was used. However, this has yet to be verified.<sup>63</sup> It is also proposed that in some textiles produced in the Mixtec and Huave communities on the Pacific coast of Oaxaca, an extract from the sea mussel *pliciopurpura pansa* was used to produce shades of pink to purple in the fibres. These include a *rebozo* shawl, Inv. No. 71639, a *pozahuanco* wrap skirt, Inv. No. 71863, and a men's shirt with trousers, Inv. No. 71847 ab. This hypothesis also needs to be verified by chemical analysis.<sup>64</sup> The last specific decorative technique used in the textile collection under examination is *ikat* batik, known as *jaspe* in the Mayan-speaking region.<sup>65</sup> This is a complex technique involving the knotting of cotton fibres and their subsequent dyeing, which is often the domain of entire families in the Guatemalan Highlands.<sup>66</sup> In the examined collection this batik technique is mainly used on items originating from Guatemala, predominantly from the collection of Emilie Preisová,<sup>67</sup> as well as on five pieces of women's *rebozo* shawls from Mexico.<sup>68</sup> We identified that this dyeing technique was used on 27 textiles.

### Guna – Molas

A very specific group of textiles is the cotton panels and blouses of the Guna from the San Blas Islands (Guna Yala) in Panama. Unlike most Mexican and Mesoamerican garment-making techniques, the actual *mola* technique is relatively recent and is a distinctly female art form.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> e.g., Inv. No. 62316.

<sup>58</sup> e.g., Inv. No. 62317.

<sup>59</sup> e.g., Inv. No. 61699.

<sup>60</sup> e.g., Inv. No. 56678 a–c.

<sup>61</sup> See Inv. Nos. 62311, 62312 c, 71773.

<sup>62</sup> Inv. Nos. 58640, 71758, 71759, 71804–71806, 71913.

<sup>63</sup> Examples include carpets, tapestries, and *sarapes* Inv. Nos. 44636, 56677, 67878.

<sup>64</sup> At present, there is no specialized laboratory in the Czech Republic capable of performing chemical analysis to confirm the use of extract from the marine mollusc *pliciopurpura pansa*. Therefore, it is planned to conduct an analysis as part of further research using a laboratory abroad.

<sup>65</sup> *Ikat*, or *jaspe*, may have originated independently in the Americas, or it might have been adapted from Philippine textiles that arrived in Latin America via the Manila galleons between the mid-16<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. See Blum Schevill 1991, p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Chandleret al. 2015, p. 61.

<sup>67</sup> The *ikat* (*jaspe*) decoration is particularly visible on the *corte* wrap skirts from collection – Inv. Nos. 71732, 71769, 71876.

<sup>68</sup> Inv. Nos. 59086, 61700, 62180, 62320, 67876.

<sup>69</sup> Halbmayer 2020, p. 270.

It developed only at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, probably evolving from body-painting with the juice of the jagua (*genipa americana*).<sup>70</sup> Over time, *molos* have become not only a characteristic element of Guna cultural identity, but also a widely-traded tourist commodity. *Mola* consists of layering individual pieces of brightly-coloured, cut-out motifs and sewing them together into mosaic-like compositions. All the *molos* represented in the collection under discussion are hand-sewn. The cotton poplin itself is not produced in Guna communities but is imported and purchased at markets in Panama City or Colón.

Characteristic of Guna women's textile art is the blending of traditional and new elements and the intertextuality of the depicted scenes, as can also be seen in the textiles in the examined collection. Representations are found of local animals (flying fish – Inv. No. 71752 [Pl. 18], parrot – Inv. No. 59040, birds – Inv. No. 64065, and waterbirds called *sikwi* on a blouse *molagana* – Inv. No. 59042 [Pl. 17]), as well as, for example, the image of an angel, an obvious cultural import (Inv. No. 63716) [Pl. 18]. The collection also contains *molos* with typical geometric patterns that sometimes allude to the animal world – for example, the *molos* Inv. No. 59039 [Pl. 17] and 59041 may reference the cut-open liver of a mountain pig (*yambina mola*)<sup>71</sup> or the depiction of the internal tissue of another animal. One *mola* (Inv. No. 68503) depicts the path of the hermit crab (*gole igar mola*).<sup>72</sup> *Molos* are further distinguished by the number of colours (layers) used. A *mola* with two coloured layers is called *mor gwinagwad* (Inv. Nos. 59042–59043), a *mola* with three layers is called *obolaged* (Inv. No. 68503), and the most elaborate type – with many layers of different sizes – is known as *mor gonikat* (all the other *molos* in the collection).

## Collectors and methods of acquisition

### *Before 1989*

A distinctive feature of the collection under study is that the vast majority of its more than 300 textile artefacts and ensembles were acquired during the communist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia (1948–1989), a period when travel to the Americas was severely restricted for citizens of countries behind the Iron Curtain. Nevertheless, the Náprstek Museum succeeded in assembling a remarkably diverse corpus of textiles from Mexico and Central America during this time. This article therefore focuses on collecting context and curatorial strategies that shaped the formation of the collection. In the following chapter, we highlight the most significant ensembles and collectors that best illustrate the acquisition patterns and limitations described above. Photographs of selected textiles that exemplify these contexts are presented in the photographic section at the end of the article.<sup>73</sup>

### *The Ensemble of Emílie Preisová from Guatemala (before 1920)*

The largest collection of textiles from Mayan-speaking groups in Mexico and Guatemala, comprising 38 artefacts, was acquired in the Guatemalan Highlands and Chiapas before 1920. It

<sup>70</sup> Salvador 1997, p. 156.

<sup>71</sup> Salvador 1997, p. 188.

<sup>72</sup> Salvador 1997, p. 155.

<sup>73</sup> It was impossible to avoid a certain degree of subjectivity in this regard. The opinions of the craftswomen themselves, who are still engaged in handicrafts, or local experts have been taken into account. The author of this study also found her two study trips to Mexico and Guatemala very useful for the general evaluation of the collection. During these trips, she met, talked to, filmed, and observed many local craftswomen at work and saw hundreds of their textile products.

is part of an ensemble of approximately 198 pieces of arts and crafts from this region, which includes other folk art (ceramics, ceramic and straw miniatures, lacquered gourds, etc.). From the entry in the accession register, it is only known that the collection was purchased by the Náprstek Museum in two batches in 1977 and 1978 from Emilie Preisová and furthermore, that the entire collection was acquired in Mexico and Guatemala before 1920.<sup>74</sup>

Interestingly, this entire ensemble lacked any description in the museum's archival documentation. There was no detailed information explaining its acquisition before 1920, nor the name and details of the original collector. It was probably not Emilie Preisová, but no other information about her was provided other than her first and last name. Considering the acquisition practices in Náprstek Museum of the time, it is possible that the original collector was a person undesirable to the regime (e.g., an emigrant) and that her name was therefore not included at all.

By comparing the collection with other collections from a similar period held abroad (most notably the collection of the Hearst Museum of Anthropology in Berkeley, California, published in *Maya Textiles of Guatemala: The Gustavus A. Eisen Collection, 1902*)<sup>75</sup> and by considering the materials used, we assume that the record stating the collection was originally purchased before 1920 is accurate. This corpus consists mainly of artefacts from the K'iche' from Guatemala (from the departments of Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán) and from the K'iche' from city of San Cristóbal de las Casas in the Mexican state of Chiapas.<sup>76</sup>

Within the collection, textiles dyed using the *ikat* batik technique – known in Guatemala as *jaspe* – stand out – for example Inv. Nos. 71749 or 71762 [Pl. 1]. A distinctive feature of the collection, which is possibly another indicator of its age, is the use of silk fibres – for instance, hair accessories *cintas* Inv. No. 71764, 71789 [Pl. 2] and *huipil* Inv. No. 71865 [Pl. 2], which is almost entirely embroidered with silk. The collection contains textile components from different regions, which shows that the collector probably spent a longer period in the Mayan-speaking area and was familiar with it.

#### *Mexican Folk Art exhibitions (1967 and 1982)*

A significant segment of the Mexican part of the studied collection came from two acquisitions in 1967 and 1982. In both cases, it was an exhibition with the same title *Mexické lidové umění* (Mexican Folk Art) organized by the Embassy of the Mexico in Prague in cooperation with the Náprstek Museum.<sup>77</sup> In both 1967 and 1982, the exhibited artefacts were accepted into the collections of the Náprstek Museum immediately after the exhibition ended. Tracing the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of the entire 1982 exhibition has been possible. The then head of the ethnographic department, Dr. Josef Kandert (1943–2022), and the museum management managed to negotiate with the Mexican side that the Náprstek Museum would be able to keep these items in exchange for an equivalent amount of Czechoslovak folk craft artefacts, which then actually went to Mexico. In this way, 1700 products of contemporary Mexican folk crafts found their way into the collections of the Náprstek Museum,<sup>78</sup> including a collection of more than 140 textiles from 16 groups from all over Mexico.

Only five textiles from the 1967 donation were added to the Náprstek Museum's collections,

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<sup>74</sup> Acc. Nos. Np43/1978, Np23/1977. See also Onderka et al. 2024, p. 75.

<sup>75</sup> Blum Schevill 1993.

<sup>76</sup> Acc. Nos. Np23/1977, Np43/1978.

<sup>77</sup> Melicharová 2024b, p. 72.

<sup>78</sup> Melicharová 2024b, p. 72.

whilst in 1982, a total of 127 textile artefacts were added, which at first glance seems like a big difference. However, it should be noted that for 56 items from the examined collection, it wasn't possible to identify the collector or the year of acquisition with certainty. Two of these textiles are reliably from Panama, 11 are from Guatemala, and a total of 43 items without a known collector or date of acquisition are from Mexico. Given their age, it can therefore be assumed that at least some of them were also part of the 1967 donation.

From the analysis of the collection acquired for the Náprstek Museum, we can infer that the aim of the two travelling exhibitions *Mexické lidové umění* (Mexican Folk Art) was primarily to visually illustrate the richness of Mexican handicraft and folk art. The exhibition, held in 1985, was conceived entirely as a large marketplace. Its aim was also to present Mexican textile production as such (it included unfinished products, samples of raw materials, and looms for backstrap weaving) and to showcase representative and diverse costumes of the Indigenous peoples of Mexico. However, it was merely a selection – a display rather than a comprehensive representation of Indigenous textile production in Mexico.<sup>79</sup>

The rationale behind this selection is somewhat difficult to decipher. It appears that both the most numerous groups (Zapotec, Nahuá, Mixtec) and those whose ethnic dress is visually distinctive and markedly different from the others – such as the *huipil* of the Trique or the male and female costumes of the Huichol and the *huipil* of the Amuzgo – were chosen. The exhibition featured a higher representation of groups from the State of Oaxaca, whilst groups from northern Mexico were almost entirely absent. The exhibitions also deliberately presented syncretic and mestizo products, typically associated with folk dances and festivals (e.g. Inv. No. 71888 a–d).

Amongst women's ethnic clothing we could mention as noteworthy are hand-embroidered and brocaded *huipil* from Triqui (Inv. No. 56687) [Pl. 4], Mixtec (Inv. No. 62314) [Pl. 4] or Tzotzil (Inv. No. 71796) [Pl. 5]. The core of the collection also includes for example a complete set of Zapotec women's clothing from the Villa Hidalgo Yalalag community (Inv. Nos. 71817–71819) [Pls. 5–6], and Huichol (Inv. No. 56678 a–c).

The ensemble also includes men's attires. Amongst them are two complete sets of ceremonial clothing of the worn by the Huichol, including hats (Inv. No. 56679 a–e [Pl. 3], Inv. No. 56700 a–c) and the aforementioned men's clothing of the Mixtec from the Santiago Ixtayutla community in Oaxaca. (Inv. No. 71847 ab) [Pl. 7].

#### *Curators Václav Šolc and Kateřina Klápšťová in Mexico (1975, 1977, 1985)*

Despite the aforementioned limited access to the region during the communist era, two curators from the Náprstek Museum managed to visit Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s and bring back textile products. However, this was done under specific conditions.

Václav Šolc (1919–1995) was curator of American collections and director of the Náprstek Museum. He visited Mexico twice, in 1975 and 1977. Unlike his previous stays in Bolivia (1963) and especially Chile (1966–1967, 1968–1969, 1971, 1973), these were not long-term field studies in indigenous communities. Šolc's earlier research, particularly in the case of Chile during the Allende era, was supported by broader cooperation between Czechoslovakia and leftist Chile in the economic and political spheres.<sup>80</sup> However, the context in Mexico was quite different. Václav Šolc stayed here accompanied by the then Czechoslovak ambassador to Chile, Josef Rutta (1921–2009), who was his guide and at the same time a person trusted by the communist regime who knew his way around Mexico well. They also purchased items for their collections together.

<sup>79</sup> Unfortunately, no documentation materials were provided for these textiles, or they have since been lost.

<sup>80</sup> Melicharová 2024a.

Their collection of more than 400 items of folk art (mainly ceramics, but also toys, paper products, and papier-mâché) also includes both traditional clothing worn by Indigenous Peoples and products intended for tourists. Šolc drew on these travels in his popular educational book *Indiánským Mexikem* (Indigenous Mexico, 1983) in which he describes visits to markets and communities where he probably acquired the textiles. Šolc in his book specifically mentions markets in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas,<sup>81</sup> where he probably purchased three of textiles in the collection Inv. Nos. 56686, 71801, and 71897. Another possibility is that he bought them in the Tzotzil villages of San Juan Chamula and Zinacantán, which he also mentions in his book.<sup>82</sup> In addition to ethnic clothing elements from Chiapas, the collection includes tourist pieces strongly influenced by Western aesthetics (e.g., Inv. Nos. 71802 [Pl. 9] and 71899). Šolc's collection also includes several ethnic garments of the Huastecs, apparently acquired in the same place, amongst them a complete women's ethnic attire (Inv. No. 62312 a–d) [Pl. 8].

Kateřina Klápřšřová (1948–), Šolc's successor as curator of the American collections travelled to Mexico in 1985. It was a study trip arranged by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic as a token of gratitude for her work on an exhibition entitled *Ekvádorské lidové umění* (Ecuadorian Folk Art), based on foreign loans from Ecuador.<sup>83</sup> As Klápřšřová herself recalls, she was accompanied by a guide throughout the trip and essentially had no opportunity to engage in longer conversations or deeper relationships with any of the local residents.<sup>84</sup> In a personal conversation, Klápřšřová mentioned that throughout her visit she felt she was being closely monitored by the authorities.<sup>85</sup>

Nevertheless, the visit to Mexico was an important and thoroughly positive experience for her, which she later transformed into a focus on Mexico in her curatorial work. On this trip Klápřšřová acquired several items which, like Šolc's collections, came from local markets in tourist areas. Klápřšřová brought back two women's *rebozo* shawls: one from the Purépechas of Michoacán (Inv. No. 59085) [Pl. 9] and the other from Oaxaca, from the Zapotecs (Inv. No. 59086).

Unlike in South America (particularly Chile and Bolivia), the textile collections brought from Mexico by the curators are very small – comprising only 17 textiles and textile ensembles, mostly purchased at markets in larger cities. Given their limited scope, no deliberate acquisition strategy can be discerned. In both cases, the only evident intention was to obtain products made by Indigenous Peoples.

### *Other collectors*

The possibility of visiting Latin America was just as limited, if not more so, for private travellers as for employees of Náprstek Museum. One of the easier ways to travel to Mexico or Central America was as an official trade representative of state enterprises or as a specialist within the framework of cultural or scientific exchange.<sup>86</sup> It was through this route that several other travellers made their way to Mexico and later contributed to the expansion of the Náprstek Museum's collections.

The first one which will be briefly mentioned here is textile graphic artist Vlastimil Vodák (1946–). He donated his collection of 21 Mexican textiles and weaving samples to the Náprstek Museum. Vodák acquired the collection partly in the 1980s, when he was invited to lecture at the University of Mexico City as part of a cultural exchange between Mexico and Czechoslova-

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<sup>81</sup> Šolc 1983, pp. 92–95.

<sup>82</sup> Šolc 1983, pp. 122–137.

<sup>83</sup> Bortlová-Vondřáková 2021, p. 128.

<sup>84</sup> Bortlová-Vondřáková 2021, p. 129.

<sup>85</sup> Kateřina Klápřšřová, *pers. comm.*, September 2025.

<sup>86</sup> Opatrný 2013.

kia. Part of the collection was then received by Vodák as a gift in subsequent years thanks to his friendly contacts with a Czech immigrant living in Mexico, which he maintained after his return. The ensemble consists mainly of smaller handmade items based on the fashion of the time and intended for tourists. The collection is unique in that it also includes samples (incomplete textile products) of various techniques of weaving and dyeing textiles, a field to which Vodák himself has dedicated his entire life. It reflects Vodák's efforts to collect examples of weaving and textile techniques that were unfamiliar to him and could serve as inspiration for his own work. The collection also includes two items from Oaxaca, probably from the Huave community, which are remarkable for their use of a specific dyeing technique using extract from sea mussels *Plicopurpura pansa* (Inv. Nos. 71638 and 71639 [Pl. 10]).<sup>87</sup>

The second, significantly more complicated way for travellers to reach Mexico during the communist era was a private trip with state permission. This required a state-approved passport, an exit visa, and a foreign currency allowance.<sup>88</sup> Such trips without a significant official reason were extremely rare. Nevertheless, the people who managed to travel in this way were usually quite well acquainted with the cultures and regions they were heading to and had good contacts abroad. This is also reflected in the nature of the acquired collections – not merely tourist artefacts purchased at markets in large cities, but often also interesting ethnic garments of Indigenous Peoples from more remote areas, as we further demonstrate with specific examples in the following section.

The specific difficulties in obtaining the necessary documents are mentioned by the traveller Mnislav Zelený (1943–). In his book *Veselé tropy Amazonie* (The Joyful Tropics of the Amazon, 2016) Zelený describes what helped him travel to South America in 1972. Petr Polák, a cameraman from Krátký film,<sup>89</sup> accompanied him to the Amazon and documented the expedition. They obtained official permission to travel to America thanks to Kamil Pixa (1923–2008), a former high-ranking officer of the StB,<sup>90</sup> who was the director of Krátký film at the time.<sup>91</sup> Elsewhere in the book he mentions Marie Jírová, an official at the Ministry of Culture, 'one of the last good souls of 1968', who helped Zelený get his application for a study stay in Peru approved.<sup>92</sup>

In his travels to Latin America, Mnislav Zelený focuses mainly on the Amazon region. Nevertheless, the ensemble from Zelený also includes seven textiles from Mexico, Honduras, and Costa Rica, which Zelený acquired in 1969. He stated that he bought or exchanged all items directly from local families in the communities. For example, he exchanged a hammock made

<sup>87</sup> Another collector able to be mentioned in this context is Naďa Vacková (precise biographic dates are unknown). Naďa Vacková came to Mexico as the wife of Václav Vacek, coach of the Mexican national water sports team. The textiles that were donated to the Náprstek Museum after her return in 1984, represent simple products for tourists purchased at markets in large cities. See Acc. No. Np105/1984; Inv. Nos. 58640, 58912, 58913, 58914, 59062, 59076.

<sup>88</sup> Travel regulations outside the Soviet bloc changed over the course of the communist era in Czechoslovakia, but typically the following documents were required: a) valid passport, b) as for men: a confirmation of their military identity cards handing-over, c) obtaining a written consent from the ROH (Revolutionary Trade Union Movement), d) exit visa permit, e) obtaining a written consent from the employer, f) official invitation certified by a notary, g) stamp customs and currency declaration, h) bank certificate about allotment of foreign currency, i) valid visa, j) consent of the military administration, k) copy of a criminal record. See Bednářová 2016.

<sup>89</sup> Krátký film was a state-owned Czechoslovak film enterprise, established in 1946 after the nationalisation of cinematography. It became independent in 1948 under the Czechoslovak State Film organisation, and by 1950 it operated four studios. Its main focus was the production of short films, especially popular science and educational works, documentaries, animated and puppet films.

<sup>90</sup> Czechoslovakia's political police and intelligence service under the control of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

<sup>91</sup> Zelený 2016, p.13.

<sup>92</sup> Zelený mentions that Jírová had previously 'fought for' the Czechia-Polish geological expedition Cotopaxi 72 in Ecuador. See Zelený 2016, p. 63.

by Chorotega the only artefact from Costa Rica in the textile collection) in the small community of Santa Barbara on the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica for costume jewellery from Jablonec at a local pub. He bought the women's *huipil* with embroidered flowers (Inv. No. 71962) [Pl. 11] directly in the Yucatec settlement of Kantunil in Yucatán and he purchased a woollen Zapotec *poncho* Inv. No. 72014 from a local family in Oaxaca where he stayed overnight, and he also bought another Zapotec *poncho* Inv. No. 72015 thanks to contacts made in the family with whom he stayed in the community of Santa María de Coyotepec.

Although Zelený managed to establish direct contact with Indigenous People and textile makers, his collecting activity – unlike his later acquisitions in the Amazon region – did not follow a deliberate acquisition strategy. Rather, it consisted of more or less spontaneous purchases of items that appealed to him during visits to particular communities or households and that the locals were willing to offer.

The second collector who travelled to Mexico and Central America as a private individual during the communist era was Milan Calábek. Despite all efforts, it was impossible to learn much about his journeys to this day. Milan Calábek, originally a theatre dramaturge, in the 1980s he became interested in the spirituality of non-European nations and began traveling around the world.<sup>93</sup> A collection of 16 textile artefacts was purchased from him in 1978 and 1979.<sup>94</sup>

In the case of Milan Calábek, however, a certain deliberate collecting strategy is observed, which may have stemmed from his personal acquaintance with Josef Kandert, then head of the collections department, and from his likely awareness of the types of artefacts missing from the Náprstek Museum's holdings. Moreover, Calábek must have been relatively well acquainted with the field and had the opportunity to acquire even more rarely represented ethnic garments from groups living in remote areas. As an example, mention-worthy is the *huipil* brought by Milan Calábek from the Mam from the Todos Santos Cuchumatán (Inv. No. A8147) [Pl. 13] and Mam from Huehuetengo (Inv. No. A8119) [Pl. 13] a wedding *huipil* of the Triques from the Mexican state of Oaxaca (Inv. No. A8121) or the complete male clothing of the Tzotzil from Santa Catarina Pantelhó and San Juan Chamula (Inv. No. A8117 a–c [Pls. 11–12], A8118 a–d).

The third way Czechoslovak citizens could occasionally reach Mexico and the countries of Central America during the communist era was, of course, emigration. This naturally provided travellers with freedom of movement, the possibility to stay longer in one place, to become more familiar with the market of handicrafts, and thus to acquire even highly specific artefacts. This is very well illustrated by the case of Petr Poledník (1943–). Poledník first emigrated from Czechoslovakia to the United States in the 1960s and later moved with his family to Mexico to fully dedicate himself to artistic work.<sup>95</sup> He sold a small collection of twelve Mexican textiles – noteworthy decorative tapestries and carpets, mostly made of wool – to the Náprstek Museum in 2014.<sup>96</sup> These textiles formed part of a larger collection of 66 objects of folk art from Mexico and North America. The ensemble also included other woollen textiles made by Indigenous Peoples of the U.S. South-West, ceramic miniatures and toys from Mexico, as well as folk votive paintings.<sup>97</sup> Poledník purchased these tapestries and carpets in the 1980s at flea markets in the Mexican city of Guadalajara. However, their likely dating is the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>93</sup> Melicharová 2024b, p. 70

<sup>94</sup> The sale of the men's jacket with Inv. No. 68501 is attributed to Blanka Calábeková, but there is no further information about her travels to Central America.

<sup>95</sup> Petr Poledník, *pers. comm.*, 23 May 2025.

<sup>96</sup> Acc. No. Np18/2014; Inv. Nos. 67868–67878.

<sup>97</sup> Acc. No. Np18/2014.

Amongst them are six items made by the Zapotec from Oaxaca, featuring motifs typical of the community of Teotitlán del Valle. This type of woollen Zapotec carpet or tapestry – originally men's *sarape* cloaks – is renowned and has been traded, including in the United States, since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Over time, the original practical function of the *sarape* as a male outer garment for protection against cold evolved into that of an aesthetically valued household textile. These are finely woven wool fabrics produced on foot looms, often by men or entire families. The motifs include the serrated rhomboid design known as Ojo de Dios ('Eye of God'; Inv. Nos. 67871 and 67872) [Pl. 10].

#### *After 1989*

After 1989, the opportunities to travel to Latin America expanded tremendously. Travellers from the Czech lands also had the chance to move freely in these countries without state supervision, to stay for longer periods, to travel even to remote areas, and to establish contacts with the textile producers themselves and with Indigenous People.

#### *The ensemble of Olga Vilímková from Guatemala*

A good example of this shift in collecting practices after the Velvet Revolution is the case of Dr. Olga Vilímková (1960–). Vilímková, Americanist and Spanish language professor, with her Inka Foundation (Nadace Inka) first worked for many years in Peru, where she supported the education of children from remote communities. Later, she simultaneously developed the foundation's activities and her own research and collecting in Guatemala. It was here that she bought 12 ethnographically and aesthetically noteworthy textiles from various groups of Indigenous People from the Guatemalan Highlands. In 2025, Vilímková sold this collection to the Náprstek Museum.

Vilímková assembled these textiles between 2004 and 2017 during long-term travels to Guatemala. Of all of Central America, Vilímková focused her collecting activities almost exclusively on the Mayan-speaking region. On the one hand, this is related to her research focus – she has also dedicated professional and popular educational publications to culture and society of the Indigenous People of Guatemala.<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, she purchased items in places she worked with her foundation. In a personal interview, Vilímková stated that she purchased items she liked from local weavers in small towns, often outside official marketplaces. These include, within the Náprstek Museum collection, specific garments of certain Indigenous groups that have so far been either absent or only scarcely represented. Amongst them are a complete woman's costume of the Kaqchikel from the community of Santiago Sacatepéquez (Inv. Nos. 72032 and 72033) [Pl. 16]; a *huipil* of the Ixil from the community of Chajul near Santa María Nebaj (Inv. No. 72027) [Pl. 14]; a male ceremonial head covering (*tzute*) of the K'iche' from the town of Chichicastenango; and *huipiles* of the Kaqchikel (Inv. No. 72030) [Pl. 15] and the Tz'utujil (Inv. No. 72029) [Pl. 14] from the Lake Atitlán region.

<sup>98</sup> See Vilímková 2014; Vilímková 2017.

## Conclusion

The Central American Collection of the Náprstek Museum comprises 396 textiles and textile ensembles from Mexico and Central America. This article presents the first comprehensive assessment of a previously unpublished and entirely unknown collection, which should be further studied in the future, particularly with an emphasis on the cultural and ethnographic dimensions of the artistic production of the various Indigenous groups whose ethnic garments and other artefacts are represented in the corpus under study. This article primarily focuses on a more detailed assessment of the acquisition history of this collection.

The majority of this collection originates from Mexico (296 items), followed by Guatemala (86), Panama (12), and single examples from Honduras and Costa Rica. For analytical purposes, the collection is divided into three cultural areas: Mexico; the Mayan-speaking region (southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras); and Panama with Costa Rica.

Within Mexico outside the Mayan-speaking area, 155 textiles representing 14 indigenous groups (Amuzgo, Huastec, Huave, Huichol/Cora, Chinantec, Mazahua, Mixtec, Nahua, Otomí, Popoloca, Purépecha, Totonac, Trique, and Zapotec) were identified. The Mayan-speaking region is represented by 104 textiles from 12 groups (Ch'orti', Chuj, Ixil, Q'eqchi', Q'anjob'al, Kaqchikel, Mam, K'iche', Tojol-ab'al, Tzotzil, Tz'utujil, and Yucatec). Thirteen additional textiles are from Panama and Costa Rica, largely produced by the Guna. The ethnic attribution of 125 artefacts remains uncertain, although the probable region of origin has been identified for 53. These pieces are often adapted to Western aesthetics, produced for tourist markets, or ceremonial garments with transcultural features.

The majority of the textiles are handmade using foot looms or backstrap weaving (approximately 215 artefacts). Most of the remaining textiles are machine-sewn from factory-made cotton canvas or some type of synthetic or fabric, with a small group of them being crocheted or knitted. Cotton is the dominant material (over 300 artefacts), while 47 items are made entirely of wool, particularly carpets, tapestries, *ponchos*, and *sarapes*. Decoration is often elaborate: approximately 120 textiles employ the brocade technique, 131 are embroidered, and many combine multiple techniques.

The formation of the collection was shaped by the political and cultural context of Czechoslovakia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More than 300 artefacts were acquired before 1989, during the communist dictatorship, when travel to the Americas was severely restricted. Nevertheless, the museum enriched its holdings through various means. Notable acquisitions include the undocumented ensemble associated with Emilie Preisová (1977–1978) and the collections from the *Mexican Folk Art* exhibitions of 1967 and 1982. Curators Václav Šolc and Kateřina Klápštová added further textiles during study trips in the 1970s and 1980s, although their movements were closely monitored by the regime, whilst other contributor – including Vlastimil Vodák, Mnislav Zelený, and Milan Calábek – donated pieces obtained via cultural exchanges and private journeys. A later donation from émigré Petr Poledník illustrates how migration also contributed to the collection.

The analysis of acquisition contexts reveals significant differences in collection strategies. Whilst certain parts of the collection (such as the early Guatemalan ensemble of Emilie Preisová) reflect a more deliberate and long-term approach, most later additions resulted from opportunistic collecting mainly through short-term visits of curators or institutional exchanges. A key role was played by the two exhibitions *Mexické lidové umění* (Mexican Folk Art, 1967 and 1982), after which the displayed artefacts were incorporated into the museum's holdings. However, these exhibitions focused primarily on aesthetically appealing crafts, without deeper ethnogra-

phic analysis and without a clear rationale for the selection of the Indigenous groups and their traditional garments presented.

Similarly, the collecting activity of curators in the 1970s and 1980s (Václav Šolc and Kateřina Klápšřová) was not based on systematic field research but rather on purchases at urban markets, often of objects produced for tourists. This paradox reflects both the ideological constraints and the practical limitations of travel under the communist regime. By contrast, the collecting activities of Mňislav Zelený and Milan Calábek show more individual approaches: Zelený acquired objects spontaneously through direct contact with local communities, whilst Calábek probably had a clearer intention to complement the museum's holdings with artefacts from underrepresented ethnic groups.

After 1989, collecting practices shifted. With unrestricted travel, scholars and collectors could undertake longer stay, engage directly with producers, and acquire textiles of greater ethnographic and artistic significance. Guatemalan collection assembled by Olga Vilímková between 2004 and 2017 exemplifies this new phase, being based on long-term fieldwork and direct purchase from Maya weavers.

Overall, the Náprstek Museum's holdings testify to the interplay of ideology, diplomacy, and scholarship in shaping ethnographic collections in Central Europe. The collection reflects a tension between randomness and intention in acquisition practices, between scientific and aesthetic motivations, and between the effort to document authentic Indigenous cultures and the realities of the time. The collection constitutes a significant resource for the study of indigenous textile traditions, whilst also reflecting the impact of political regimes and historical ruptures on acquisition practices.

The traditional textile arts of Mesoamerican Indigenous Peoples remain vibrant, and the Central American Collection continues to expand through new acquisitions and donations. This study presents the state of the Collection as of 2025, with the online database serving as a continuously updated resource for future scholarship.

The Central American textiles are complemented by another major body of Latin American material in the museum: the South American Collection. This corpus, still unpublished, includes more than 200 textiles from Bolivia, Peru, and Chile, primarily of wool, and approximately 80 archaeological finds, mostly from northern Chile. Other South American regions are less represented, with 20 items from Colombia and Venezuela, 27 from Paraguay and Argentina, and 7 from Brazil. Future research will thus focus on the Andean collection.

## The online database of the collection:

<https://stredoamerickytextil.nm.cz/>.<sup>99</sup>

## Acknowledgments

Photographs by Jiří Vaněk.

<sup>99</sup> Melicharová 2025.

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Inv. No. 71749



Inv. No. 71762

MATERIALIA

Pl. 2



Inv. No. 71762



Inv. No. 71789



Inv. No. 71865

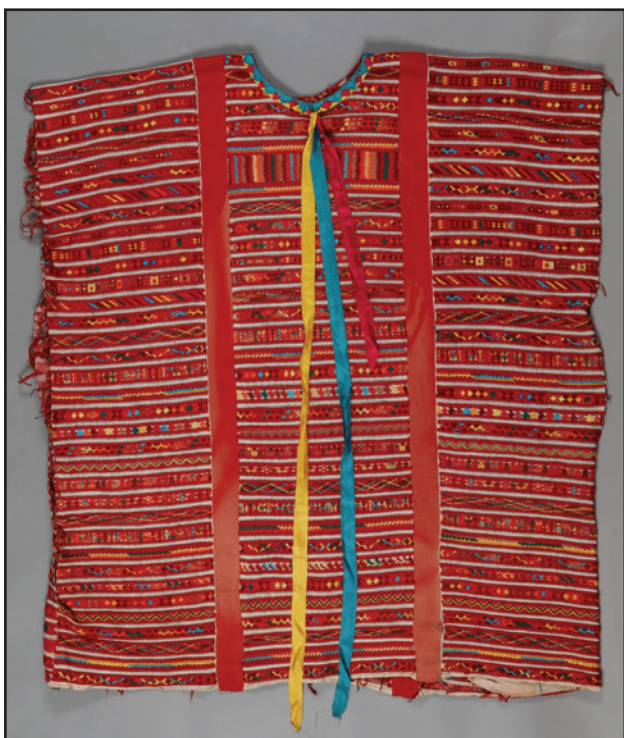


Inv. No. 71789 e



Inv. No. 36679 a-d

Pl. 4



Inv. No. 56687



Inv. No. 62314



Inv. No. 71796



Inv. No. 71817

Pl. 6



Inv. No. 56687



Inv. No. 62314



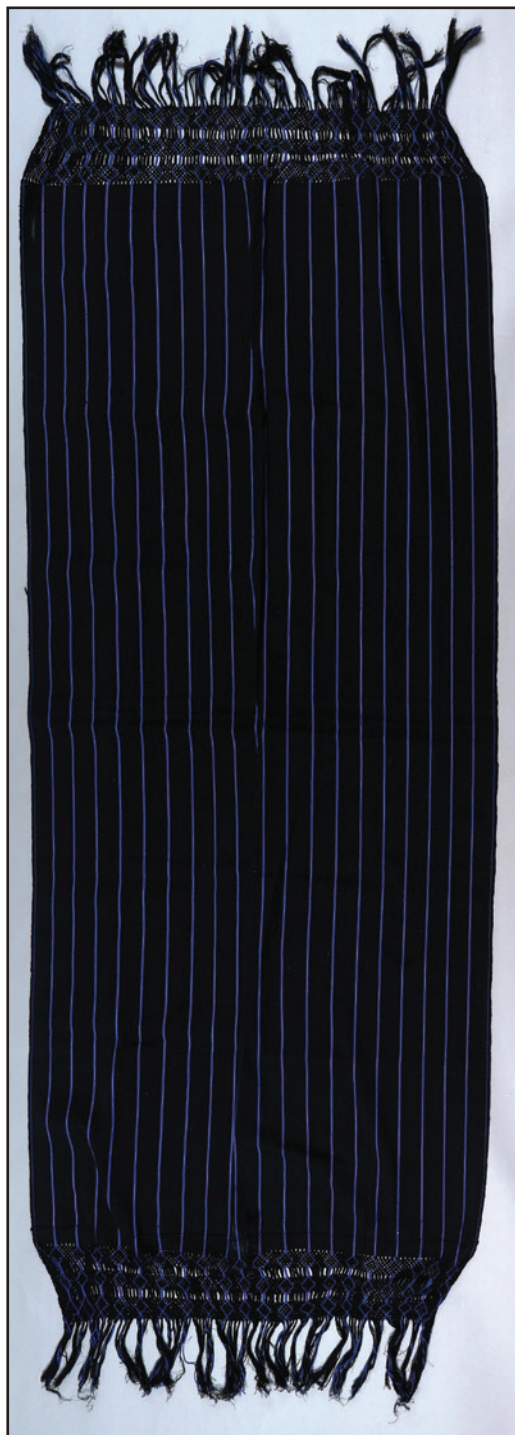
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Inv. No. 67872



Inv. No. 71639



Inv. No. 71962



Inv. No. A 8117 b

Pl. 12



Inv. No. A8117 a, c



Inv. No. A8119



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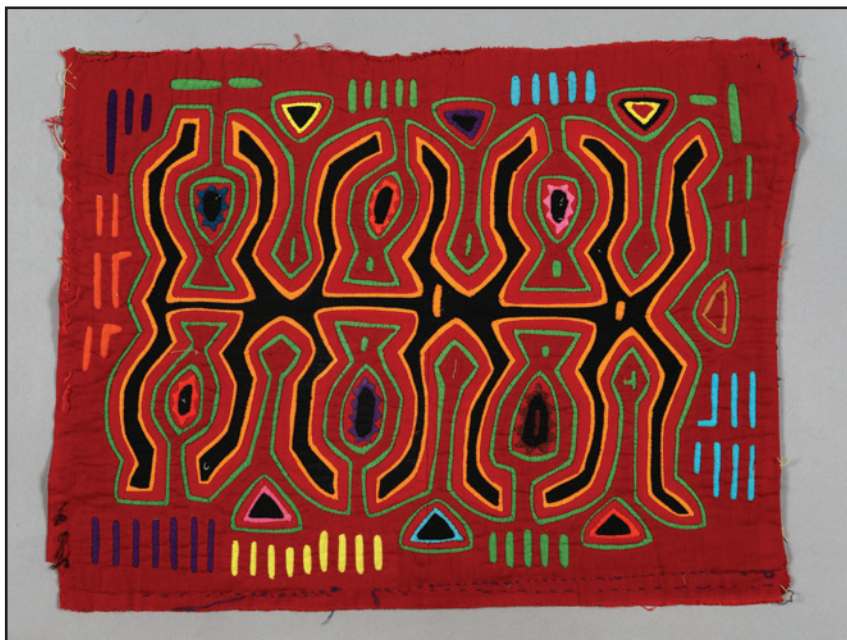


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